

Quilombolas' Lives Matter

Speeches and Literacies of Re-Existence amid the Pandemic in Brazil

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About the Special Issue: Discourse Studies Essays on the Corona Crisis

Edited by Jens Maeße, David Adler & Elena Psyllakou

This special issue seeks to collect ideas, reflections and discussions on the multiple aspects of the ongoing corona crisis from a discourse analytical and discourse theoretical point of view. We publish short work-in-progress papers (approx. 1000–3000 words) that take empirical, ethical, psychoanalytical, economic, political and everyday aspects as starting point for developing discourse analytical research ideas and reflections which can be further developed into full research papers at a later time.

Quilombolas' Lives Matter

Speeches and Literacies of Re-Existence amid the Pandemic in Brazil

Vângela Vasconcelos &
Rosineide Magalhães de Sousa

This paper aims to show how the Quilombola Kalunga Community, in the State of Goiás (Brazil) has faced and adapted to a new reality in the course of the corona crisis. For that, we have as *corpus* the video “What to do amid the pandemic”, starring a Quilombola undergraduate student who reports social aspects of her community in the pandemic scenario. We use a Critical Discourse Analysis and Netnography approach to reveal the discourse of resistance and re-existence of communities that generally are obscured by the public power and the official media. As a social contribution, we intend to give more visibility to the Quilombolas' fights to resist the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: Quilombolas, Critical Discourse Analysis, Netnography, Resistance and Re-existence, COVID-19

Since the beginning of the COVID-19, pandemic news has been spread throughout the media in many different ways. In the media, we usually watch experts talking about the symptoms and the treatment of this disease and also get information on the number of people that got infected or passed away. But what we are going to talk about in this paper is rarely seen by most people in general. It is about a minority group who is striking to survive the pandemic in Brazil: the Quilombolas.¹

This paper presents an excerpt from an ongoing research, whose theme is the social conditions of traditional Quilombolas communities in Brazil, in times of pandemic of COVID-19. The aim is to show how the *Kalungas*, a Quilombola community in the State of Goiás – Brazil, has faced and adapted to the new reality of the pandemic. For that, we have as *corpus* the video “O que fazer em quarentena (What we do in quarantine)”, that is part of a project called “Vozes do Campo (Voices of rural people)”, by the Universidade de Brasília, starring the Quilombola undergraduate student *Ana Leda*, who reports social aspects of her community in this pandemic scenario.

Theoretical assumptions of “Critical Discourse Analysis” (Fairclough, 2007; Giddens, 2001; Lakoff & Johnson, 2002) and “The Literacy Studies” (Street, 2007; Souza, 2011; Sousa, 2016) constitute the theoretical basis of this paper, and also “Netnography” (Kozinets, 2014), which consists of searching for data on the internet for observation, description and analysis of these data. The Critical Discourse Analysis categories for examining Ana Leda's discourse are: *evaluation* and *metaphors*. By analysing a particular practice, we intend to interpret the relation between the discourse and the Quilombolas' social practices.

1 Contemporary Quilombos are rural black communities inhabited by descendants of slaves who maintain kinship ties, *the Quilombolas*. Most live on subsistence crops on donated / purchased / secularly occupied land. They value cultural traditions of ancestors, religious (or not), recreating them. It has a common history, explicit rules of belonging, awareness of its ethnic identity.

The contribution of this work is to reveal the discourses of resistance and re-existence of communities that, generally, are obscured by the public power, within this pandemic scenario. In this sense, videos and audios transmitted on the internet play an important role in the fight for the rights of minority social groups.

Social background of the pandemic

2020 will be remembered as “the year of re-existence”. Since the beginning of the pandemic, which affected millions of people around the world, whether from an economic, social or political perspective, people have had to adapt to the new ways of interacting, working and surviving in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, this new lifestyle and adaptation process amid the pandemic is the so-called *re-existence*.

It is true that for people who belong to privileged social classes, the adaptation process is less conflictual, since good wages and jobs can supply the possible economic difficulty that individuals are going through. Although middle and upper class citizens have to meet the requirements of the WHO (World Health Organization), such as social distancing and the use of personal protective equipment, in order to avoid the more rapid spread of COVID-19, there is no significant economic impact on the lives of people with greater purchasing power and their quality of life is not so (deeply) affected. In Brazil, we have social groups who have the kinds of privilege mentioned before – the middle and upper classes – which have good conditions to face the pandemic: good salaries, comfortable homes and access to media technologies, like cell phones, desktops and computers.

On the other hand, in the peripheries of large urban centres, in the settlements of the landless and in the regions where the Quilombolas and peasants live, most people have low family income and facing the pandemic is much more challenging. In Brazil there are about three thousand remaining communities. In these regions, in addition to the fact that there are usually no public hospitals and health professionals to care of these citizens, in most neighbourhoods there are no adequate conditions for basic sanitation and hygiene either. We have often seen whole families gathering in a single room, without the slightest conditions for avoiding contagion from their relatives and neighbours. In these places, living conditions are inhospitable and access to cultural goods and technology is quite restricted.

As COVID-19 advances over Quilombolas’ regions in Brazil social inequality becomes even more visible. According to the observatory of COVID-19, of the ‘National Coordination of Articulation of Black Rural Quilombolas’ Communities’, we currently have more than 723 confirmed cases and 156 deaths of remaining Quilombolas. It should also be noted that these data are collected autonomously by the observatory, since the official data are not reliable because they

are underreported. If we continue at this pace, the spread of the disease will be devastating in Quilombolas’ regions. The absence of the State in relation to actions to combat the pandemic is evident: there is a lack of tests for COVID and, in addition, the performance of COVID-19 tests is almost non-existent in these regions.

In order to give visibility to these traditional peoples who have suffered and struggled in their trajectory, Quilombolas and Peasants resist and articulate to fight for their rights in the midst of the pandemic. Community leaders and movements for the right to land, undergraduate students in rural education, professors and researchers come together in an attempt to bring the demands of Quilombola peoples to the attention of the Brazilian population, making their struggles, their basic needs and actions public in order to fight the pandemic. For that same reason, social networks are used as a means of reaching the largest possible number of people around Brazil and the world.

Through lives, web conferences and podcasts, representatives of different Quilombolas’ segments and peasants – from the educational, legal and political circles – debate and share actions to confront and resist the hard blows stricken by the government against them. A recent example of one of these discrimination policies was the repeal of the law that guarantees quotas for Afro-descendants and indigenous people when entering postgraduate courses. Racial quotas are configured as an important action for the social inclusion of blacks and indigenous people in postgraduate courses. Fortunately, after the change of the Minister of Education, the repeal of that law was annulled.

Although there is negligence and neglect by the Federal government in relation to Quilombolas and Peasants, we find around the country speeches (and actions) of resistance and re-existence, which are reconfigured and propagated in the alternative media as the reality of COVID-19 forces them to adapt to new ways of survival. These speeches and actions are broadcast on the web, contesting the power relations between traditional peoples and the State, bringing to light the social injustices they suffer. The student’s speech reveals the *literacies of re-existence* (Souza, 2011), that points to the diversity of literate practices that shape the Brazilian reality and confronts the great inequalities that exist between groups: race, class, gender, region, age group, education, professional insertion. In her book, Souza highlights activities such as hip-hop, graffiti and music as acts of re-existence by her students and here we extend this concept to the actions of Quilombolas students on web videos as also being part of literacies of re-existence, and also resistance.

Souza also shows that the understanding of this complexity and, mainly, the possibilities of changes in the literate practices of the subjects are real, so that people of blacks and peasants can, during virtual interactions, have an active voice in society. In this direction, the virtual and technological tools are configured as an important literacy agency, as information disseminators and interconnectivity

networks. For Sousa (2016, p. 90) “literacy practices, as in all other social interactions, are mediated by interest, therefore, they are ideological”, hence the need to make the voice of Quilombolas and Campesinos heard, for that they can defend the interests of their communities.

In addition, web activists reveal themselves to be proponents, reflective, active and challengers, given the current situation in which they find themselves. The activists’ speeches suggest a level of *reflexivity*. The concept of reflexivity, initially developed by Giddens (1991) suggests that every practice has a discursive element, not only because it involves, to a varying degree, the use of language, but also because discursive constructions about practices are also part of these practices. Giddens (1991) also proposes the concept of institutional reflexivity.

The reflexivity is institutional, as it is produced by specific specialist systems, such as community associations and movements for the right to land and reflexive because the terms introduced by a given speech end up transforming the reality in which the speech itself is formed; this, in principle, would give social actors the possibility to choose and decide as to the direction of their daily lives, consumption, agency, etc. According to the author, “the reflexivity of modern social life consists in the fact that social practices are constantly examined and reformulated in the light of renewed information about these practices, thus changing their character” (Giddens, 1991, p. 45). Thus, the discursive practices of Quilombola representatives shape and are shaped by the social practices of resistance and re-existence.

Practices may progressively depend on these reflective self-constructions, that are increasingly informed by institutional reflexivity, which can lead to the maintenance of domination relations, or, on the other hand, can be recreated, signalling the possibility of social change. It is in this direction that the Quilombolas’ agency matters, as they are individuals, inserted in discursive and social practices, which corroborate for the transformation of social structures, in complex and unpredictable ways. In digital discursive events, for example, norms are modified, questioned or confirmed in transformative actions (Vasconcelos, 2013). Consequently, social agents have a relative freedom to exercise their creativity and modify practices established and regulated by the (coercive) structures of power, thus assuming autonomy on the part of individuals.

According to Giddens (2002), reflexivity constitutes one of the central aspects of modernity, one of the main ‘outlines of high modernity’ or, more adequately to research, the organizing principles of the ‘information society’ projected realities, proposing representations and imaginary (speeches) legitimized as new ways of (inter) acting (genders); inculcated in new ways of being (identities), and ma-

terialized in new instruments and techniques of production or ways of organizing space (Fairclough, 2007).

Based on the Critical Discourse Analysis, a critical-explanatory approach to studies of language as a social practice that combines social and discursive analysis, we investigate the social context of the particular practice of a video broadcast on the web in which the situation of Quilombola during the pandemic is narrated by a Quilombola undergraduate student. For this analysis we used the representational categories *evaluation* and *metaphors*. *Evaluation* is a representational-identifiable category, in which we investigate what the actors consider positive and desirable (or not), relevant or irrelevant in the speeches broadcast on social networks. *Metaphors*, according to Lakoff and Johnson (2002) consist of understanding one thing in terms of the other, we always understand particular aspects of the world according to our physical and cultural experience, correlating them with other deeply intricate aspects in our culture.

Discourses of resistance and re-existence on the web: Representations on how the Quilombolas face the pandemic

In this scenario of actions, speeches and literacies for the re-existence of Quilombola peoples and peasants, we analysed a speech by an undergraduate student at the University of Brasilia who is taking the Rural Education Course. In the video, she recounts the challenges her community has faced during the pandemic.

Ana Leda Dias is a young Quilombola undergraduate student at Universidade de Brasilia (UnB) who presented a video on the web. This action is part of a project entitled: “Vozes do Campo (Voices of Rural People)”². We can observe during the recording that her style is calm and clear, although the situation in the Quilombola territory is precarious when it comes to resources to face the pandemic. In her speech she addresses several aspects that deserve our attention, as we will see below.

The attempt to prevent COVID-19: according to the student, the first preventive measure against COVID-19 was the closing of access to the community: “At this time of the coronavirus crisis, we had to adopt measures so that the virus does not arrive so abruptly in our region”. The adjective *abruptly* preceded by the adverb of intensity *so*, constitutes a metaphor that exemplifies the way the virus has reached the communities in general, while expressing the student’s concern about the accelerated way in which it spreads and can infect community members.

“As soon as the pandemic started, we *had* the closure of tourist attractions, because we are unable to meet this

2 O que fazer em quarentena. https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCeliOBrjgxt9_38ZSmJ17og (accessed May 2020).

type of demand". In this excerpt, the student reports that the first preventive measure was the closure of tourist attractions, she uses a modelizer to express her thoughts. The verb *had* expresses a necessity, in this case, almost mandatory, because although the Quilombola community is located in a region of several natural tourist attractions such as waterfalls and rivers, and several members benefit from the income that these tourist attractions generate, they had to close access to the community in order to preserve their lives.

Regarding the performance of the local government, the student evaluates it as *good*, although at the beginning of her speech she recognized that there is no adequate hospital structure for the treatment of COVID-19. *Good* is an explicit personal evaluation, that expresses a mental process. It reflects her satisfaction with the local government despite the lack of health structure they have in their community.

A major issue that the community had to deal with was the economy of the community: All the tourist attractions are closed! They are an important source of economy for the community. Although tourist attractions are an important source of income for the Kalunga community, they understand the importance of preserving their lives during the pandemic. Meanwhile, the residents of the village seek to benefit from the emergency aid provided by the federal government. She also reports that solidarity movements have helped the community a lot with the donation of basic food baskets, although we know that these are only palliative measures and of short duration.

The student also alerts their people not to believe in fake news that have been broadcasted in the media, and at the same time lights up the importance of the science. That is because some social media posts have reported that there are some medicines which could cure the COVID-19, while on the other hand scientists provide different recommendations and predict that the vaccination for the COVID-19 will be ready by the end of July 2021, at best.

What to do in times of pandemic? She points out the importance of reading and other hobbies such as physical exercises and art crafts for fighting stress and preserving mental and physical health. She also recommends to watch the tutorials on the web on how to make art crafts. This is an example of multiple modalities and literacies that people may find on the web, but the web can also be used for getting more information on the COVID context and other relevant news.

Another issue that was brought to light was the role of women during the pandemic: She also says that women have been thought to be responsible by the housework for centuries in Brazil, but nowadays it is important to share the daily tasks at home with the whole family in order give everyone in the family responsibilities and reflect upon the role of women in the present context. During the isolation period it is important to resist to sexist stereotypes that have been reproduced for centuries in Brazil.

Final considerations

There are many challenges faced by the Kalunga community in Brazil and other Quilombola communities. Through a report by a student at the University of Brasília, it was possible to understand the situation of vulnerability that the Kalunga find themselves in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, and also how they have been resisting and adapting to the new lifestyle that the pandemic imposes.

In this paper we investigated the representations of a Quilombola undergraduate student through the categories *evaluation*, *metaphors* and *reflexivity* in which we were able to understand relevant aspects about the context of Quilombola peoples during the pandemic: their attempts to survive and adapt themselves to new challenges the pandemic has brought to their communities.

The speech of the Quilombola student reveals to us a certain conformity with the situation in which the Quilombolas find themselves, in which we could perceive through the evaluation category, when she referred to the action of the local government in relation to the support given by the State, despite the lack quality public medical assistance in the community.

On the other hand, through the categories mentioned above, we found that the student is aware of the problems that the Quilombola communities face, such as the difficulty of the economic situation and the sexist issues experienced by Quilombola women, thus demonstrating their critical agency in the midst of your community.

This video starring a Quilombola student was just one of several other Quilombolas' actions that we can find on social networks. These actions are configured and reconfigured at all times, showing courage and resilience in relation to the current situation. We identified through her speech on the web a certain level of reflexivity that constitutes the information society and legitimizes new ways of (inter-)acting and being, materialized in new forms of interaction.

At the time of the web post there was one suspect case of COVID-19 in Kalunga territory and now there are more than 130 dead Quilombolas and 1000 confirmed cases of COVID-19 around Brazil. Thus, it is necessary that the lives of Quilombolas be protected by the federal and local government, also by non-governmental entities and by the whole society, giving them conditions to face the pandemic, guaranteeing the perpetuation of the culture, identity and lives of Quilombolas.

To face so many challenges, one may use digital means of communication as a tool of empowerment, resilience and resistance in times of pandemic. As we have mentioned before Quilombolas are above all individuals, inserted in discursive and social practices, which corroborate for the transformation of social structures, and their lives matter to all of us.

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